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ABSTRACT

In order to assess some of the major problems and frustrations faced by beginning administrators, a study investigated nine first- and second-year public school administrators in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. Questions asked the principals centered on their recollections of the most challenging problems faced and what was hardest for them as beginning administrators. Areas of needed preparation not addressed in the principals' administrative training programs were also identified. Challenges faced by the cohort group fell within two categories: role validation and leadership management skills. The cohort group did not have difficulty in comprehending the nature of their position and did not list mechanical and procedural issues as areas of concern. Principals interviewed were primarily concerned with personal effectiveness in the performance of their job. (3 references) (Author/SI)

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Abstract:
The Real World of Administration:
Reflections of First and Second Year Principals
by Linda Webster, Ph.D.

This article describes the first part of a longitudinal study conducted on beginning administrators. The investigation looked at nine first and second year public school administrators in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. The intent of the study was to assess some of the major problems and frustrations faced by beginning administrators. Questions asked the principals centered on their recollections of the most challenging problems faced and what was hardest for them as beginning administrators. Areas of needed preparation not addressed in the principals' administrative training programs were also identified. Challenges faced by the cohort group fell within two categories, ROLE VALIDATION and LEADERSHIP MANAGEMENT SKILLS.

Results of the study when compared with other analyses of beginning administrators offer new insights: the present cohort group did not have difficulty in comprehending the nature of their position and did not list mechanical or procedureal issues as areas of concern. Principals interviewed were primarily concerned with personal effectiveness in the delivery of their job.

The second part of the study is now being conducted. The cohort group, now in their second and third years as administrators is being interviewed. Comparisons between second and third year administrators will be made. The issue of administrator burn out is also a factor being investigated since three of the nine principals have considered leaving the profession. Factors entering into this decision will be investigated.

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The Real World of Administration: Reflections of First and Second Year Principals

by Linda Webster

> "Was I overwhelmed? Yes, but I never would admit it. I think back now and of course I was overwhelmed. I remember saying that I didn't want to say the word because I thought if I'd say it I would have lost it."
>
> *--N.M., First year elementary school principal*

One of the pleasures of supervising students who are working toward their Administrative Services Credential is following their progress. You facilitate their mastery of course content; you work with them in their administrative internships; and you suffer with them in the job application process. Ideally, you stay in touch with these former students as they become your colleagues, and you provide support as they grow in their initial years as administrators.

This article summarizes a study begun during the summer of 1988. The study was intended to provide a candid assessment of some of the major problems and frustrations faced by beginning administrators. It was a small scale investigation of nine first and second year public school administrators. It was felt that an analysis of responses from participants would be important both in the evaluation of current administrative training programs, and in the design of support systems for novice administrators who join the management team of a school district.

The administrators included in the project were all students with whom I worked as they earned their administrative credentials. Each was outstanding in university coursework and in the field practicum requirement for the credential. Each showed potential for becoming a successful, creative administrator.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology utilized to collect the data consisted of intensive semi-structured interviews conducted with the principals. With two exceptions, the interviews were conducted at the principals' schools in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. Interviews ranged in time from two to four hours.

Of the nine administrators, two were middle school principals, and seven were principals of elementary schools. Six were women; six had just completed their first year as principal; three had just completed their second year. Three had prior experience as vice principals.

The elementary schools ranged in population from 200-730. The middle schools averaged 500 students. Seven of the schools were in suburban settings; one was urban, and one was located in a rural setting. Populations ranged from 95% Anglo or Black, to 70% Asian, to a combination of ethnic groups. The school populations ranged from professional, upper middle income families to low income, blue collar families.

While many questions were raised during the interviews, the key questions asked of each principal were:

> **What was hardest for you as beginning administrator? What were your most challenging problems?**
>
> **What problems or situations did you encounter that were not addressed in the administrative training program?**
>
> **What advice would you offer beginning administrators?**
>
> **What things have been most rewarding/satisfying about your position?**

THE CHALLENGES

> **"At the begining I was really excited. In August, I spent days looking at old notes my predecessor had left me--I got a brand new Daytimer. I was excited. By the middle of October I thought 'Well, I haven't seen Mary teach for a week and I promised student council I'd drop by, and I've got this damn meeting at 11:30 that's going to take till 2:30 at least, unless we do lunch, then it'll take till 4:30.' And when I finally get back to school the staff's going to say 'Well, nice of you to drop in.'"**
>
> ***J.T., First year middle school principal***

The challenges faced by the new principals fell within two categories: ROLE VALIDATION and LEADERSHIP MANAGEMENT SKILLS.

Role Validation: All principals appeared to have a realistic assessment of what their job entailed. For most however, the dilemma came in assuming that role. Repeatedly, the principals spoke of the struggle to establish their credibility as school leaders, to gain the trust of the staff, and to prove

themselves. The attempt to establish oneself was frequently thwarted by the legacy left of the preceding administrator. A number of principals found it difficult to inherit another's systems, procedures, and patterns of operation, particularly those which had been unquestioned and unexamined by the staff for years.

To validate their role, the majority of principals spent a great deal of time during the first several months satisfying teacher requests and taking care of "cosmetic" changes that would bring instant reward and recognition. While this approach was helpful in most situations, principals were eager to point out that the initial positive reactions to such changes were short-lived. Expectations of teachers for additional changes placed added pressures on the "new regime."

All principals felt that it was important to excel in their role as instructional leader. Most felt that they gained respect as they worked directly with teachers in their classrooms and proved themselves to be outstanding teachers. Three principals were seriously concerned that they did not having enough time to serve as instructional leader. These felt they were always in a reactive mode, responding to emergencies and others' priorities. J.T., a first year middle school principal, express the frustration of "failing" to accomplish the ideal and to be in total control of one's job:

> "My mustache turned grayer. I lost some hair. That forced me into the third thing which is worst of all. Particularly to a person like me. I had to accept mediocrity a lot and I hated it. I couldn't get to the things I wanted to. I really tried, yet I still found myself accepting mediocre things, particularly mediocre performances on my part. I had a hard time living with that."

Principals without prior experience as vice principals commonly stated that they found themselves in a Catch-22 situation. Teachers respected them for their recent experience in the classroom but at the same time questioned their capability to perform the job adequately. These individuals continually struggled to prove themselves as capable and worthy of the position.

The amount of time required to learn the job was frequently mentioned in the interviews, and most principals felt that enlisting the staff's support helped them to learn the ropes and also to establish their credibility. It was permissable to say that you did not know something in the context of competence, but only for the first year. It was also agreed that the same "mistake" must never happen twice!

Throughout the interviews, there were numerous references to the fact that ready or not, one had to assume the role of principal with confidence and authority. This was what was expected by parents, teachers, and students. It was clear that each principal took this responsibility quite seriously. Many acknowledged the weight of feeling responsible for the total operation of the school and of meeting others' expectations regarding the role of principal.

Leadership/Management Skills: Beginning principals also encountered problems that related to basic management skills and interpersonal relations/conflict management skills. It is interesting to note that these areas were referred to again when principals identifed problems and situations not addressed in the administrative preparation program.

Most principals felt that they could gain specific technical expertise if they had enough time and resources. For example, two principals listed budget procedures as a particular problem for them, but each felt that they would be able to pick up the knowledge that was needed.

The administrators wished that they had been better prepared for the challenges of time management and establishing priorities. All principals recognized that good time management skills were key to their effectiveness, but many found themselves unable to gain adequate control of their own time so that they could look ahead and plan courses of action. These principals concentrated the bulk of their energies on establishing themselves, and responding to the new demands of the job.

Communication and conflict management skills were also needed by the administrators. Each principal related at least one difficult interpersonal conflict during the year. Memories of these were sharp and frequently filled with anguish and regret that the situation had not been handled better. Principals were uncomfortably surprised as they dealt with large numbers of different people in the role of problem-solver and decision maker.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE ADMINISTRATIVE TRAINING PROGRAM

> "I don't think any program can make you ready for what it feels like to be a principal. To actually have to sit here and work with parents, work with teachers, work with kids, and juggle fifteen things at once, and put a lot more on the shelf because they have to wait while the crises come and go. You can realize it at the cognitive level, and you can learn about it; you can talk to people who have been there, and you can understand at a certain level. But you don't actually feel it until your pulse starts shooting up as a parent is yelling and screaming at you, or when a teacher is in tears about how rough her class is, and you've got to do something about it. It's just a little bit different."
>
> *J.W., First year elementary school principal*

There were a few suggestions regarding content of specific courses within the administrative training program (e.g., more realistic budget assignments, greater emphasis on state curriculum frameworks and guidelines). The majority of suggestions for improvement dealt with training in basic management and interpersonal relations/conflict management skills.

The principals suggested coursework and experience in the following areas: developmental psychology; individual and group psychology; conflict resolution; dealing with people; working with people in a group. Principals asked for exposure to "real-life" experiences, dealing with emotional people and with confrontations. They needed more preparation for the day-to-day management of an entire school; working with teachers. They also wanted their training to help them gain insight into the emotions that a principal might feel.

ADVICE FOR BEGINNING ADMINISTRATORS

> "When you interview for a job you tell people all of this stuff which you have done, and will continue to do, and how you're going to do it. And in a sense, when you're a principal, you're always interviewing, telling people how you're going to do things, what you're going to do, why you're going to do it. Also, you remind them of what you have done. There's a lot of politics in leadership.
>
> *J.W., First year elementary school principal*

Principals frequently advised new administrators to "build a support network." They often acknowledged the loneliness of the position and that there was usually no one on staff to confide in.

Most of the principals participated in support systems that their school districts provided. These usually included monthly meetings for new administrators and the assignment of a mentor who was on call for questions and advice. These support networks were seen as very valuable and it was the unanimous recommendation that they should be available to all new administrators.

Additional advice to new administrators included:

Be a good listener.
Don't rush into hasty actions or decisions.
Set up a personal plan by which to live that includes adequate rest and time for yourself.
Keep your vision close at hand.
Be sensitive to others' expectations of you, particularly the superintendent's.

REWARDS

> "The rewards have been slim I guess. I try to be as honest as I can with people. And when people ask me 'Is it fun?' I try to avoid answering that directly. It's kind of flippant but I say, 'Some days more than others.' I don't know if it's supposed to be fun yet. And I wish people wouldn't ask me."
>
> *J.W., First year elementary school principal*

The quote from J.W. summarizes what the administrators felt: being a principal was not easy, and the rewards were infrequent. When asked to name some rewards, all but one principal mentioned the potential to effect positive change. All principals recognized the potential to make a difference in peoples' lives--students, parents, and teachers. The reward of seeing children acitively involved in the learning process was frequently mentioned. J.G., a first year elementary school principal stated what was felt by most of the administrators:

> "The day to day aspects of my job are not rewarding. I can't say that I come home from work and say, 'Ah! What a great day I had.' The thing that's most rewarding to me is curriculum. When the teacher says to me 'We want to improve math' and I go and get a workshop person and the workshop goes really well and the next day everybody's trying out the stuff in their classroom...and when teachers come to me for support and help and they consider me some kind of expert, someone who can really help make the school better. That's rewarding."

DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING AND SUPPORT

The principals included in this study differed from each other as much as their schools did. The experiences they had as beginning administrators also differed widely. T.B. was in a difficult situation, located in a large inner-city school that received no support from the central district office. J.W. was assigned to a large suburban school with severe inner city school problems. J.G. was assigned to a school that was almost closed twice in the previous four years. On the other end of the continuum, S.B. was located in a school district that gave every conceivable support to its principals. Her students' achievement scores were high and the majority of teachers could be considered outstanding. J.T. was in an affluent school district where students performed well.

Given these differences, one would expect some variation in principal responses about the problems they experienced as new administrators. Such did not prove to be the case. As a whole, the principals listed interpersonal conflict resolution and the validation of themselves as principal as two most challenging problems.

The results of this study can be compared with other analyses of beginning school administrators. For example, Daresh (1987) also found interpersonal conflict to be a major concern for the twelve first and second year principals he interviewed, and Mascaro's (1976) principals evidenced what was strikingly apparent in the current population: the belief that change could be effected through personal involvement within classrooms.

It is interesting to note differences between the Daresh and Mascaro reports and this study. First, Daresh reports that the principals he studied had difficulty comprehending the precise nature of their position. Principals interviewed in the current project had an accurate understanding of the job and their role as administrator--they came to the position knowing full well its demands and responsibilities. Second, the Daresh population listed mechanical or procedural issues as areas of concern. The principals interviewed in this study were more concerned with personal effectiveness in the delivery of their job; it was largely accepted that areas of technical skill development could be mastered when the need became apparent.

The Mascaro study illustrates what often happens to beginning administrators: because of time constraints, the accepted importance of spending quality time in classrooms begins to be de-emphasized and is replaced with the practice of "in/out" classroom visitations. Mascaro cites that new administrators also begin to de-emphasize the need for first hand

knowledge of what is happening in classrooms. The population analyzed in this study faced demands for time enumerated by Mascaro: attending meetings, taking care of paperwork, handling discipline problems and holding parent conferences. Their response however, was to alter their schedule where possible so that quality time could be devoted to classroom visitations. The principals studied worked hard to fulfill their role as instructional leader. While the previously quoted J.T. warred against mediocrity in his performance, like his colleagues in the study, he refused to give up instructional responsibilities.

In considering the administrators interviewed, and the problems they identified, it is conceivable that their administrative training program influenced their performance as beginning principals. Each came from a rigorous training program that provided them with both a sound theoretical base from which to operate, and a solid practicum that afforded them a wealth of experience. With this background, it is understandable that the principals came to their positions with an accurate assessment of what the job would be like. Likewise, they brought with them a solid base of practical and theoretical knowledge that held them in good standing as they encountered new learning situations.

While strong in some ways, the training program did not adequately prepare the principals for conflict resolution. The responses of the beginning administrators reflect this, and give support to Kelly's (1983) claim that while there continues to be a need for future administrators to receive a strong foundation or organization and administrative theory, emphasis needs to be placed on "people-handling" skills, human relations, and public relations.

> "It's like starting up teaching. We look back on it and say, 'Whoa, I got away with that?' But it's different because you can't shut the door. A lot of the first year teaching mistakes are not visible. This is a fishbowl. The teachers are going to know what I'm doing and a lot of the parents are too. When you really feel that you don't know what you're doing, that's difficult. So it takes time to develop, for any person. But it also takes time to move a school that has been a certain way a long time."
>
> *J.W., First year elementary school principal*

> "I think my relfections after a year are clearer in a sense that I'll be able to try some new things now. Other people have managed to make being a principal work for them and not ruin their health. I always assume that whatever job I take I'll be successful. What cost is it to be successful? I never asked that before. Is it worth it? I'm not really sure but I know that while it's a bad question to ask, it's not a bad

> question to answer. For me, it's too soon. After just this one year, if someone is asking 'Is it worth it?' I will tell them from my standpoint that's a great thing to think about, but I'm not going to answer it. Not yet."
>
> *J.T., First year middle school principal*

> "I remember those people who came to speak to our class about being an administrator and I would say to myself, 'I don't know if I want to do this, if it's like what they say.' And you know what? It's exactly how they described it. It is such an insane, crazy job. Then I look at myself and I say 'Why do I like this?' And I do, I really love it."
>
> *N.M., First year elementary school principal*

About the author: Linda Webster is Associate Professor in the Department of Administration and Higher Education, School of Education, at San Jose State University. She is in her second year at that institution. Prior to San Jose State, Webster served for five years as Coordinator of the Administrative Services Credential Program at the University of California, Berkeley. It was in that capacity that she began her longitudinal study of new administrators.

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